

**MINUTES OF REGULAR MEETING
OF THE
DARTMOUTH SCHOOL COMMITTEE**

March 1, 2021

The warrants for bills payable were reviewed and signed by the School Committee.

CALL TO ORDER

The meeting was called to order by Chairperson Chris Oliver at 6:30 p.m. The Chair reported a decision was made to hold this meeting remotely via zoom technology; the public was not allowed to physically access the meeting. The Chair stated the meeting is streaming live on the DHS Media YouTube channel and noted the meeting is being videotaped for future broadcast over DCTV. The Chair informed viewers that public comments can be emailed to the recording secretary at kathleengenthner@dartmouthschools.org to be read during Public Comment.

On a roll call the following members were present: Mr. Oliver, Mrs. Amaral, Mrs. Waite and Mr. Nunes. Dr. Jenkins was not in attendance.

Also present: Dr. Gifford, Mr. Kiely, and Mrs. Genthner.

PUBLIC COMMENT

Mr. Oliver stated public comments can be emailed to the recording secretary at kathleengenthner@dartmouthschools.org.

It was reported that public comments were received and forwarded to the Committee.

The Committee clarified that public comment emails are received, considered and made part of the record.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES

Mrs. Amaral moved, seconded by Mrs. Waite to approve the Regular Session Minutes of February 22, 2021. On a roll call vote, the motion carried: 3-0. Mrs. Amaral – Yes; Mrs. Waite – Yes and Mr. Nunes - Yes. Mr. Oliver abstained.

PRESENTATIONS

FY22 Budget: Dr. Gifford and Mr. Kiely presented the proposed FY22 budget.

Dr. Gifford stated the budget development has followed the same process as in previous years and invited Mr. Kiely to present the proposed budget to the Committee.

Mr. Kiely shared his screen and directed the Committee to the budget proposal and provided explanations of the proposed budget which included strategic objectives and guiding priorities.

Mr. Kiely stated the district is proposing a budget of \$47,338,665 for FY22 and briefly explained how the monies will be appropriated to the following budget categories: instruction (which includes most salaries, instructional supplies, special education services); administration (which includes administrative technology – district wide, legal services); maintenance and utilities; other services (which includes transportation, attendance, health, athletics, music) and tuitions (which includes students who cannot be served in district and are sent “out of district.”)

Mr. Kiely reported a \$1,751,929 or 3.8% over last year’s budget.

Mr. Kiely stated these proportions are consistent with what has been spent in previous years.

Mr. Kiely explained the reasons for percentage changes in each budget category.

Mr. Kiely stated the transportation contract expires this year and is going out to bid this month noting there will most likely be an increase in this service.

Mr. Kiely concluded his presentation noting the matter of the proposed FY22 budget will be on subsequent meeting agenda for further discussion and stated the public hearing date is scheduled for March 22nd.

Mr. Nunes asked what, if any, news has been received from the Town Administrator or Treasurer.

Mr. Kiely stated the Town received some favorable information as it concerns health insurance.

OLD BUSINESS

COVID-19 Update-Continue Discussion on Expanding In-person Learning: Dr. Gifford reminded the Committee that all school districts were required to provide three back to school plans including a full return to school plan to the State Department of Secondary and Elementary Education (DESE) last summer.

Dr. Gifford continued noting that although a full return to school plan was submitted to DESE the district, after careful logistical consideration and collaboration with building administrators, returned students to school this past fall in a remote then hybrid model.

Dr. Gifford stated central and building administrators started a conversation on how to begin expanding in person learning prior to February vacation.

Dr. Gifford stressed the logistical and financial challenges to expanding in person learning: notably the purchasing and placement of desks in order to maintain physical distancing.

Dr. Gifford commented the District believes it is a good time to begin the expansion of in person learning particularly as the number of local positive cases are trending downward and the vaccine is becoming more available.

Dr. Gifford reported last week DESE announced a plan to seek authorization from the Board of Education to take remote and eventually hybrid learning “off the table” relative to how districts are able to count “on time” learning and eliminating capacity limits for elementary bus transportation.

Dr. Gifford noted DESE is looking to have elementary level students in buildings by April and focus on expanding middle and high school in person learning later on.

Dr. Gifford noted the mitigation strategies that the district has in place will be maintained - mask wearing, 6 ft physical distancing in common areas and sanitizing the buildings – the spacing of desks will be reduced to 3 feet instead of the current 6 feet to accommodate more students per classroom.

Dr. Gifford stated the distance criteria for contact tracing will remain at 6 feet.

Dr. Gifford stated principals have been asked to look at how lunch would be served as it will continue to take place in classrooms.

Dr. Gifford added that MCAS testing will take place - ELA starts April 5th through May 17th and Math April 26th through May 28th; building administrators need to plan for that schedule whether in hybrid or full in person learning.

Dr. Gifford stated all students currently in the virtual model including the virtual academy will remain in that model.

Dr. Gifford stated that expanding in person learning and the changes to mitigation strategies the District proposes have been carefully considered after conversations with Chris Michaud, Director of Public Health for the town of Dartmouth.

Dr. Gifford offered a draft timeline to introduce expanding in person learning at the elementary level only: return all Pre-K and Kindergarten students on March 29, 2021; Grades 1, 3 and 5 on April 5, 2021 and Grades 2 and 4 on April 12, 2021.

Mr. Oliver introduced Chris Michaud who was invited to tonight's meeting to "go over" information regarding where Dartmouth stands in terms of positive case numbers and health trends and whether he has any concerns as the district looks to expand in person learning.

Mr. Michaud thanked the Committee and took the opportunity to express his appreciation to the school district for the assistance provided to the town at its vaccine clinics by the following personnel: maintenance, IT, clinical and support staff.

Mr. Michaud commented on where "we" stand on March 1st with COVID-19 transmission in Dartmouth by providing a timeline of transmission trends.

Mr. Michaud reported that "we" have continued to see a decline in cases over the last couple of weeks.

Mr. Michaud qualified his comment stating he does not think "we" are "out of the woods" and would not want people to think there is less reason to remain vigilant noting his concern about upcoming school vacations.

Mr. Oliver asked for confirmation from Mr. Michaud that he is recommending "we" watch the case trends over the next week or so to see where positive case trends are going.

Mr. Michaud confirmed that recommendation.

Mr. Oliver asked if the State is currently in Phase II Group II for vaccine distribution and Phase II Group III which includes educators and school personnel will open in mid-March.

Mr. Michaud confirmed the information but qualified his response explaining it will likely be affected by vaccine availability and the increase in the number of eligible individuals.

Mr. Oliver asked if pool testing would help to get students in the buildings more quickly.

Mr. Michaud gave reasons why he felt pool testing would not work effectively in getting students back to the school buildings emphasizing his concern the stress of extra duties would put on school personnel.

Mr. Nunes asked, in his opinion, about the effects of the State's change in guidance from 6 feet to 3 feet of physical distancing.

Mr. Michaud responded it would increase the number of close contacts in classrooms and, more concerningly, on buses.

Mr. Nunes asked Mr. Michaud his opinion on preventing large numbers of educators out of work due to side effects from the vaccine.

Mr. Michaud responded that vaccine clinics could be set up on Friday to provide extra non-working days to recover from vaccine side effects which last about 24 hours normally.

Mrs. Waite asked Mr. Michaud about the risks of introducing more elementary level students to the classroom to non-vaccinated educators.

Mr. Michaud responded that there are many variables to consider making a blanket response to the question is difficult citing individual factors such as existing comorbidities.

Mr. Michaud added he feels that DESE is being very aggressive in its new guidelines particularly as they relate to transportation.

Mrs. Waite asked what effect the new COVID variants would have on the current situation in Dartmouth.

Mr. Michaud responded it is too soon to tell.

Mrs. Amaral added comments about the vaccine becoming available to educators.

Mr. Michaud left the meeting at 7:32 p.m.

Mr. Oliver directed the Committee to the proposal made by Dr. Gifford to expand in person learning and made recommendations that the Committee continue to look at health trends for the next couple of weeks as well as pointing out that there are logistical issues (desks) to consider.

Mr. Oliver stated he is not in support of full, one hundred percent (100%) in person learning without teachers being vaccinated but recommends we look at Pre-K and Kindergarten and our more vulnerable student populations.

Mrs. Waite asked Dr. Gifford for her thoughts on students in the middle and high school who are failing classes and bringing them in to the schools.

Dr. Gifford explained what has been offered to students at the high and middle schools.

Mrs. Waite asked how the quality of learning which has been maintained during the hybrid phase will continue when more students are returned to the classroom.

Dr. Gifford responded noting there will be changes as to how lessons will be taught when more students are introduced; Dr. Gifford noted that building leadership meets with teachers to make plans for their individual buildings and this information is brought to central administration at district leadership team meetings emphasizing the collaborative effort of decisions.

Mrs. Amaral asked for the average elementary cohort size.

Dr. Gifford responded.

Mrs. Amaral asked if measurements confirm that classrooms can accommodate the 3 ft. guideline with all students present.

Dr. Gifford responded affirmatively.

Mrs. Amaral asked if the measurements are based on students having individual desks.

Mr. Kiely stated the current elementary classroom tables cannot be used when full enrollment is implemented because it does not provide for the 3 ft. spacing requirement; the district will need to purchase new desks.

Mrs. Amaral asked how lunch will be served since that requirement will remain at 6 ft.

Mr. Kiely stated lunch is a complex scenario as well as mask breaks and nothing has been decided at this time; we are looking at "lunch shifts" in the classroom.

Mrs. Amaral stated she would not feel comfortable returning every single learner back until "we" prioritize those learners we return to in person learning first; Mrs. Amaral asked if "we" could identify, this evening, who those students might be; Mrs. Amaral offered her recommendation for Pre-K to 2 and students struggling in the current model.

Mr. Nunes asked Mr. Kiely how long it will take to get the desks assembled and moved into the classrooms and will this take place on weekends; will any extra work time be covered under CARES funding

Mr. Kiely stated that desks will need to be assembled and moved in to classrooms during "off hours" adding he is confident extra work time would be covered by CARES funding.

Mr. Nunes stated he would like to see all students returned to in person learning.

Mr. Oliver asked if the district surveyed parents, which was done back in August, to find out how many would feel comfortable with expanded or full in person learning as well sending their children to school on the bus under the new transportation guidelines.

Dr. Gifford responded that that has not been repeated at this point but it would be considered if a tentative plan could be provided to parents.

Mr. Oliver asked if the district is aware of any other area districts that returned to full in person learning.

Dr. Gifford responded affirmatively.

Mr. Nunes moved to approve the Superintendent's recommendation of March 29th to return Pre-K and K; on April 5th Grades 1, 3 and 5 and on April 12th Grades 2 and 4 to full in person learning.

The motion failed with no second being offered.

Mrs. Waite asked if the Superintendent has viewed any public or private school classrooms that is currently allowing full in person learning.

Dr. Gifford responded she visited Bishop Stang today.

Mr. Oliver stated he is prepared to approve Pre-K and K for March 29th but not the other grades proposed at this time.

Mrs. Amaral asked if the Committee could wait until the next meeting which is scheduled for March 8th to make the decision.

The Committee agreed it is better to make the decision sooner and give parents more time to plan.

Mr. Oliver asked Dr. Gifford if the district would be ready to move Pre-K and K to full in person on March 22nd.

Dr. Gifford stated that would be possible.

Mrs. Amaral stated she would like to see any approval of expanding in person learning to take a "deeper dive" and prioritize students in the middle and high schools who would benefit from more in person learning.

Mr. Oliver asked that Dr. Gifford speak with the high and middle school administrations about these student populations and report back to the Committee at the next meeting.

Mr. Nunes moved, seconded by Mrs. Waite to approve a return to school plan for Pre-K and K starting on March 22nd, Grades 1, 3 and 5 on April 5th and Grades 2 and 4 on April 12th. On a roll call vote, the motion carried unanimously: 4-0. Mr. Oliver – Yes; Mrs. Amaral – Yes; Mrs. Waite – Yes and Mr. Nunes - Yes.

Mr. Oliver asked that the administration keep the Committee informed of any data from the Town's Board of Health.

NEXT MEETING

Next Meeting: The next regular session of the School Committee will take place at the Dartmouth High School Library Media Center on Monday, March 8, 2021 at 6:30 p.m.; the public will not be granted physical access to this meeting but will continue to have access to meetings via live stream at the DHS Media YouTube channel <https://youtube.com/dhstvmedia>.

Mrs. Amaral stated that DESE is accepting applications to nominate a *Teacher of the Year* noting the deadline is March 8th.

Mr. Nunes moved, seconded by Mrs. Waite to adjourn from Open Session at 9:24 p.m. The motion carried unanimously: 4-0. On a roll call vote, the motion carried unanimously: 4-0. Mr. Oliver – Yes; Mrs. Amaral – Yes; Mrs. Waite – Yes and Mr. Nunes - Yes.

Respectfully submitted,



Bonny L. Gifford, Ed. D.
Superintendent